

AND SHE ANSWERED, "HAVING OUR SON BORN WITH ALL THOSE DEFECTS THAT REQUIRED 37 OPERATIONS TO CORRECT."

I WASN'T SURPRISED BY HER ANSWER. BUT I ALSO KNEW SHE HAD A STRONG FAMILY, A DEVOTED HUSBAND, AND THREE OTHER CHILDREN WHO WERE BORN HEALTHY AND HAVE BEEN LOVING SIBLINGS TO HER SON. SO I ASKED HER, "ALL RIGHT, WHAT WAS THE BEST THING THAT EVER HAPPENED IN YOUR LIFE?"

AND SHE ANSWERED, "HAVING OUR SON BORN WITH ALL THOSE DEFECTS THAT REQUIRED 37 OPERATIONS TO CORRECT."

**LET ME TELL YOU ANOTHER STORY ABOUT AN ADOLESCENT,
ANOTHER FORMER PATIENT OF MINE.**

**THIS ONE IS ABOUT A YOUNG MAN NAMED CHRISTOPHER. I MET
LITTLE CHRISTOPHER ABOUT 20 YEARS AGO WHEN HE WAS ONLY
4 DAYS OLD. AND HE WAS A MESS.**

A MAJOR GASTROINTESTINAL DEFECT
HE HAD ~~NOTHING~~. AND HE WAS A FLOPPY BABY. HE LOOKED
LIKE HE MIGHT BE MILDLY RETARDED. THREE OTHER
PHYSICIANS HAD DECIDED THAT CHRISTOPHER WOULD NOT BE
WORTH THE EFFORT AND THE COST OF REPARATIVE SURGERY.
AND THEY TOLD CHRISTOPHER'S MOTHER SOMETHING THAT
NOBODY CAN EVER PREDICT: THAT IS, THE KIND OF LIFE A CHILD
IS GOING TO HAVE.

CHRISTOPHER HAD A LEARNING DISABILITY. FROM THE VERY BEGINNING, HE NEEDED A LOT OF HELP AND A LOT OF LOVE. AND HE GOT BOTH.

CHRISTOPHER'S FAMILY HAD STARTED OUT PRETTY MUCH LIKE MOST AMERICAN FAMILIES. REALLY, I THINK YOU CAN MEET PEOPLE LIKE HIS MOTHER AND FATHER ALMOST EVERY DAY ANYWHERE IN THIS COUNTRY.

BUT THEY HAVE A SPECIAL ADVANTAGE: THEY'VE HAD CHRISTOPHER.

**CHRISTOPHER HAS TAUGHT THEM A GREAT DEAL ABOUT LIFE.
AS A DISABLED CHILD, THEN AS A DISABLED ADOLESCENT HE
MADE THE REST OF HIS FAMILY...**

ABLE TO CARE DEEPLY ABOUT EACH OTHER...

**ABLE TO GIVE EACH OTHER GENUINE, UNABASHED LOVE AND
AFFECTION...**

**AND MADE THEM ABLE TO EXTRACT FROM THEIR OWN HEARTS
AND SPIRITS THE FINEST, PUREST INSTINCTS OF HUMANITY**

CHRISTOPHER BROUGHT ABOUT AN EXTRAORDINARY CHANGE IN THE LIFE OF THIS OTHERWISE ORDINARY FAMILY. HE HAD ENRICHED IT SO, THAT HIS FAMILY MADE A MOMENTOUS DECISION. THEY MOVED TO A LARGER HOUSE ON A FARM OUTSIDE OF TOWN AND ADOPTED 12 MORE RETARDED CHILDREN. THEY BROUGHT THOSE KIDS INTO A SNUG, LOVING HOME, WHERE EVERYONE GROWS UP WITH A RATHER SPECIAL, RATHER PRECIOUS ABILITY TO CARE VERY DEEPLY ABOUT THE PEOPLE SITTING ON THEIR RIGHT AND THEIR LEFT.

WHEN CHRISTOPHER ENTERED ADOLESCENCE HE JOINED THE BOY SCOUTS. HE TOLD ME ABOUT IT DURING A VISIT TO MY OFFICE AT THE CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL OF PHILADELPHIA. HE SAID THAT HE HAD A GREAT AMBITION. HE HOPED ONE DAY TO BE AN EAGLE SCOUT.

YOU SEE, CHRISTOPHER DID NOT REALLY ACCEPT THE FACT THAT HE WAS A DISABLED ADOLESCENT WITH LIMITATIONS ON HIS PERSONAL LIFE AND AMBITIONS.

**I SAID, "CHRISTOPHER, I'M TICKLED THAT YOU'VE JOINED THE
SCOUTS. AND I WANT YOU TO PROMISE TO TELL ME WHEN YOU
BECOME AN EAGLE SCOUT. I WANT TO BE THERE WHEN YOU GET
YOUR BADGE.**

HE PROMISED HE WOULD TELL ME. AND HE DID

A FEW YEARS LATER I WENT FROM WASHINGTON TO *HIS HOME TOWN*
~~PHILADELPHIA~~ TO A LITTLE CEREMONY IN WHICH I PINNED THE
EAGLE SCOUT BADGE ON MY FRIEND CHRISTOPHER. HE STOOD
ON THE STAGE AND THANKED HIS PARENTS, HIS SCOUTMASTER,
HIS DOCTOR, HIS FIVE HEALTHY, NORMAL SISTERS, AND HIS 12
ADOPTIVE BROTHERS AND SISTERS. HE THANKED US ALL FOR
THE HELP AND ENCOURAGEMENT WE'D GIVEN HIM SO THAT HE
COULD ACHIEVE HIS AMBITION OF BEING AN EAGLE SCOUT. I
THOUGHT WE ALL SHOULD HAVE THANKED HIM.

CHRISTOPHER WAS A TEXTBOOK EXAMPLE OF A "DISABLED,
HANDICAPPED" ADOLESCENT. OF COURSE, IT'S OUR
TEXTBOOK...NOT HIS. AND THANK GOODNESS FOR THE
DIFFERENCE.

THESE TWO YOUNG PEOPLE -- PAUL AND CHRISTOPHER -- ARE
JUST TWO OF A LARGE NUMBER OF DISABLED CHILDREN AND
ADOLESCENTS THAT I'VE HAD THE PRIVILEGE TO KNOW AND TO
HELP DURING MY PROFESSIONAL LIFE IN MEDICINE.

THEY ARE ALL VERY SPECIAL PEOPLE TO ME. THEY WERE ALL
BROUGHT TO ME BECAUSE THEY WERE IN SOME WAY HURT OR
DAMAGED OR INCOMPLETE. THEY WERE, IN THE EYES OF
MEDICINE AND SOCIETY, TOO,
DISABLED...HANDICAPPED...IMPERFECT...DIFFICULT... THE SAME
TERMS SEEM TO BE APPLIED BY SOCIETY AT ONE TIME OR
ANOTHER TO ALL ADOLESCENTS.

**BUT I'VE LEARNED IMPORTANT THINGS FROM EVERY ONE OF
THEM. AND I'VE HAD TO ASK MYSELF, "JUST HOW COMPLETE
AND ABLE AND PERFECT AM I, IF THEY CAN TEACH ME SO MUCH
ABOUT THE WONDER OF LIFE?" AND THE ANSWER IS QUITE
HUMBLING, WHICH IS A REACTION NOT COMMONLY FOUND
AMONG SURGEONS.**

**NOW, THERE IS A DANGER IN ROMANTICIZING ILLNESS AND
DISABILITY. THAT'S NOT A HEALTHY THING TO DO. AND I HOPE
YOU DON'T THINK THE STORIES OF MY TWO YOUNG FRIENDS
WERE ROMANTIC OR FANCIFUL. THEY AREN'T. QUITE THE
OPPOSITE. THEY ARE VERY REAL YOUNG MEN.**

**THE WAY THESE ADOLESCENTS TRIUMPHED OVER
DISADVANTAGE AND DISABILITY MADE ME ASK AGAIN "WHICH
OF US IS DISABLED?"**


**IS IT THE YOUNG MAN WITH THE MUSCULAR DYSTROPHY WHO
RESOLUTELY NEGOTIATES THE SCHOOL HALLWAYS AND STAIRS
SO AS NOT TO BE LATE FOR ANYTHING? OR IS IT THE THERAPIST
WHO SEES THAT YOUNG MAN ONLY AS A DISABLED VICTIM OF
THE DISEASE.**

**IS IT THE MILDLY RETARDED YOUNG WOMAN WHO IS IN
PERPETUAL MOTION, CONSTANTLY DOING A HUNDRED-AND-ONE
LITTLE CHORES FOR HER FAMILY AND FRIENDS. OR IS IT HER
TEACHER WHO METICULOUSLY CONCENTRATES ONLY ON A
HANDFUL OF BASIC SKILLS.**

**IS IT THE TEENAGER WITH IMPAIRED VISION, NEARLY BLIND, BUT
STRUGGLING TO LEARN PIANO? OR IS IT THE NEIGHBOR WHO
SAYS SHE CAN'T PUT UP WITH THE NOISE FOR ONE MORE DAY?**

I SUPPOSE IT WOULD BE NICE TO BE ABLE TO SAY THAT I CAME
^{TODAY}
HERE ~~THIS EVENING~~ TO DELIVER A BRAND-NEW MESSAGE. BUT I
CAN MAKE NO SUCH CLAIM. MY MESSAGE IS REALLY VERY OLD.
THE TEXT IS FROM THE ETHICS OF ARISTOTLE, WHO MADE THIS
LITTLE OBSERVATION SOME 2400 YEARS AGO. I DON'T ALWAYS
AGREE WITH ARISTOTLE, BUT I'LL NEVER QUIBBLE ON THIS
OBSERVATION: /

ARISTOTLE

"THE NATURE OF MAN," ~~HE~~ SAID, "IS NOT WHAT HE WAS
BORN  AS, BUT WHAT HE WAS BORN FOR."

**AS MORE AND MORE OF OUR ADOLESCENTS ARE ALL TOO
READILY DISMISSED FOR WHAT THEY WERE BORN AS, WE NEED
TO EMPLOY THE BEST OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT, BREATHED INTO US
BY GOD, TO SEE THAT THEY CAN BECOME ALL THAT THEY WERE
BORN FOR.**